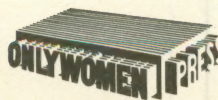


# THE HANG-GLIDER'S DAUGHTER

*New and Selected Poems*

**Marilyn Hacker**



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*from* **TAKING NOTICE**





## THE HANG-GLIDER'S DAUGHTER

for Catherine Logan

My forty-year old father learned to fly.  
Bat-winged, with a magic marble fear  
keeping his toast down, he walks off a sheer  
shaved cliff into the morning. On Sunday  
mornings he comes for us. Liane and I  
feed the baby and Mario, wash up, clear  
the kitchen mess. Maman is never there;  
that is the morning she and Joseph try  
to tell the other pickers how the Word  
can save them. Liane gets me good and mad  
changing her outfit sixteen times, while I  
have to change the baby. All the way  
up the hill road she practices on him, flirt-  
ing like she does at school. My back teeth hurt

from chewing Pepper Gum on the bad side.  
She's three years younger. I'm three years behind.  
Did he *mean* that? Shift the gum. Did I remind  
Mario, if the baby cries, he needs  
burping? I can stretch out on the back seat.  
The olive terraces stacked in the sunshine  
are shallow stairs a giant child could climb.  
My hiking shoes look giant on my feet.  
Maman says "a missed boy." What do I miss?  
I wonder what the word in English is  
for that. Funny, that we should have been born  
somewhere we wouldn't even understand  
the language now. I was already three  
when we left. If someone hypnotized me

would I talk English like a three-year-old?  
The bright road twists up; bumpily we shift  
gears, breathe deep. In the front pouch of my sweat-  
shirt, I've still got my two best marbles. Rolled  
in thumb and finger, they click, points gained, told

beads. Not for Joseph's church. If I forgot French, too, who would I be inside my head? My hands remember better: how to hold my penknife to strip branches, where to crack eggs on a bowl rim, how to pile a block tower—when I was little—high as my nose. Could I, still? The box of blocks is Mario's now. My knee's cramped. I wish that I could walk to Dad's house, or that I was up front, talk-

ing to him. How does he feel, suddenly slung from brilliant nylon, levering onto air currents like a thinking hawk? I'd be scared. I'd be so scared I can't think it. Maybe a long slope on my skateboard's like that. Climbing isn't scary: no time. The air's fizzy, you're careful what rock you hang your weight from, and where your toes wedge. My calves ache, after, ribs sting, but I'm good for something. What I like high is mountains. I'll go up the hill behind Dad's house this afternoon. I'll pick Liane flowers. Nahh, we'll be leafing magazines for school clothes on the sun porch after lunch. I like those purple bell-spikes. My cleats crunch

the crumble; I stretch to the ledge and pull out the whole rooted stalk. Sometimes there's twelve bells, purple as—purple as nothing else except a flower, ugly and beautiful at once. Across my face come the two smells: grandmother's linen-chest spice-sweet petals and wet dirt clinging, half meat, half metal, all raw. Between them I smell myself, sweaty from climbing, but it's a woman's sweat. I had one of the moon dreams again. I stood on the flyover facing purple sea, head up, while a house-huge full moon hurtled toward me; then it was me flying, feet still on the road. We're here, on top of the hill.



## TO IVA, TWO-AND-A-HALF

Little fat baby, as we  
don't run the world, I  
wince that I can't  
drive a car or a truck, ice-  
skate, build shelves and  
tables, ride  
you up five flights of  
stairs on my shoulders.  
I notice you noticing  
who rides most of the Big  
Motorcycles, drives buses,  
stacks grocery cartons, makes  
loud big holes in the street.  
"Mustn't hit little girls!" meaning  
you, though who'd  
know if we didn't say so!  
Soon they'll be telling you  
you can't be  
Batman, Shakespeare, President, or God.  
Little fat baby, going on  
schoolgirl, you can be  
anyone, but it won't be  
easy.

## PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER

You'll be  
coming home alone on the AA  
Local from Canal St., 1 A.M.  
Two black girls, sixteen, bushy  
in plaid wood jackets, fiddle  
with a huge transistor radio.  
A stout bespectacled white woman reads  
*Novy Mir*  
poking at a grey braid.  
A thin blue blonde dozes on shopping bags.  
Tobacco-colored, hatchet-faced and square,  
another mumbles in her leather collar.  
Three sharp Latinas jive round the center-post,  
    bouncing  
a pig-tailed baby, tiny sparkling  
earrings, tiny work overalls.  
A scrubbed corduroy girl wearing a slide-rule eyes  
a Broadway redhead wearing green fingernails.  
A huge-breasted drunk, vines  
splayed on cheeks, inventively  
slangs the bored brown  
woman in a cop suit, strolling.  
You'll get out at 81st St. (Planetarium)  
and lope upstairs, travelling light-years.  
The war is over!

1976

The bathroom tiles are very pink and new.  
Out the window, a sixty-foot willow  
tree forks, droops. Planted eighteen years ago,  
its huge roots choke the drains. The very blue  
sky is impenetrable. I hear you  
whine outside the locked door. You're going to cry.  
If I open the door, I'll slap you. I've  
hit you six times this morning. I threw  
you on the rug and smacked your bottom. Slapped  
your face. Slapped your hands. I sit on the floor.  
We're both scared. I picked you up, held you, lov-  
ing your cheek's curve. Yelled, shook you. I want to  
stop  
this day. I cringe on the warm pink tiles of  
a strange house. We cry on both sides of the door.



## THIRD SNOWFALL

"Take with you also my curly-headed four-year-old child."

Josephine Miles: "Ten Dreamers in a Motel"

Another storm, another blizzard  
soaks the shanks and chills the gizzard.  
Indoors, volumned to try a Stoic, a  
four-year-old plays the *Eroica*  
three times through. Young Ludwig's ears?  
No, only an engineer's  
delight in Running the Machine.  
Pop! Silence? "I was just seein'  
if I could make the tape run back."  
"Don't." "If the knob is on 8-track  
and I put on a record, what  
happens? . . . It's turning, but it's not  
playing." "That's what happens." "Oh.  
Which dial is for the radio?  
I'm going to jump up on your back!  
Swing me around!" A subtle *crack*  
and not-so-subtle knives-in-spine.  
"Get down, my back's gone out! Don't whine

about it, I'm the one that's hurt."  
"I'm sorry . . . Did I have dessert?  
What's water made of? Can it melt?"  
(I know how Clytemnestra felt.)  
"I want a cookie. What is Greek?  
Will I be taller by next week?  
Is this the way a vampire growls?  
I'm going to dress up in the towels.  
Look! I can slide on them like skis!  
Hey, I've got dried glue on my knees.  
Hey, where are people from? The *first*  
ones, I mean. What was the Worst  
Thing you Ever Ate?" *Past* eight  
at last, I see. "Iva, it's late."  
"It's not. I want some jam on bread."  
"One slice, then get your ass in bed."  
"No, wait until my record's over.  
I want my doll. And the Land Rover  
for Adventure People. Mom, are  
you *listening*? Where's the doll's pajamas?  
There's glue or something in my hair.  
Can I sleep in my underwear?  
I think I need the toy fire-fighter  
guy too . . . I'm thirsty . . ." *und so weiter.*

# LA FONTAINE DE VAUCLUSE

*for Marie Ponsot*

"Why write unless you praise the sacred places . . .?"

Richard Howard: "Audiences"

1

Azure striation swirls beyond the stones  
flung in by French papas and German boys.  
The radio-guide emits trilingual noise.  
"Always 'two ladies alone'; we were not alone."  
Source, cunt, umbilicus, resilient blue  
springs where the sheer gorge spreads wooded,  
mossed thighs:  
unsounded female depth in a child-sized  
pool boys throw rocks at. Hobbled in platform shoes,  
girls stare from the edge. We came for the day  
on a hot bus from Avignon. A Swed-  
ish child hurls a chalk boulder; a tall girl,  
his sister, twelve, tanned, crouches to finger shell-  
whorls bedded in rock-moss. We find our way  
here when we can; we take away what we need.



2

Here, when we can, we take away what we need:  
stones, jars of herb-leaves, scrap-patch workbags  
stored

in the haphazard rooms we can afford.

Marie and I are lucky: we can feed  
our children and ourselves on what we earn.

One left the man who beat her, left hostages  
two daughters; one weighs her life to her wages,  
finds both wanting and, bought out, stays put, scorn-  
ful of herself for not deserving more.

The concierge at Le Régent is forty-six;  
there fifteen years, widowed for one, behind  
counters a dun perpetual presence, fixed  
in sallow non-age till Marie talked to her.

I learn she is coeval with my friends.

3

I learn she is coeval with my friends:  
the novelist of seventy who gives  
us tea and cakes; the sister with whom she lives  
a dialogue; the old Hungarian  
countess' potter daughter, British, dyke,  
bravely espoused in a medieval hill  
town in Provence; Jane whom I probably will  
never know and would probably never like;  
Liliane the weaver; Liliane's daughter  
the weaver; Liliane's housewifely other  
daughter, mothering; the great-grandmother  
who drove us through gnarled lanes at Avignon;  
the virgin at the source with wedgies on;  
Iva, who will want to know what I brought her.

4

Iva, who will want to know what I brought her  
(from Selfridge's, a double-decker bus,  
a taxi, Lego; a dark blue flowered dress  
from Uniprix; a wickerwork doll's chair  
from the Vence market; books; a wrapped-yarn deer;  
a batik: girl guitarist who composes  
sea creatures, one of three I chose,  
two by the pupil, one by the woman who taught her),  
might plunge her arms to the elbows, might shy  
stones,  
might stay shy. I'll see her in ten days.  
Sometimes she still swims at my center; sometimes  
she is a four-year-old an ocean away  
and I am on vertiginous terrain  
where I am nobody's mother and nobody's daughter.

5

"Where I am, nobody's mother and nobody's daughter  
can find me," words of a woman in pain  
or self-blame, obsessed with an absent or present man,  
blindfolded, crossing two swords, her back to the  
water.

The truth is, I wake up with lust and loss  
and only half believe in something better;  
the truth is that I still write twelve-page letters  
and blame my acne and my flabby ass  
that I am thirty-five and celibate.

Women are lustful and fickle and all alike,  
say the hand-laid flower-pressed sheets at the  
papermill.

I pay attention to what lies they tell  
us here, but at the flowered lip, hesitate,  
one of the tamed girls stopped at the edge to look.

6

One of the tame girls stopped at the edge to look  
at her self in the water, genital self that stains  
and stinks, that is synonymous with drains,  
wounds, pettiness, stupidity, rebuke.  
The pool creates itself, cleansed, puissant, deep  
as magma, maker, genetrix. Marie  
and I, each with a notebook on her knee,  
begin to write, homage the source calls up  
or force we find here. There is another source  
consecrate in the pool we perch above:  
our own intelligent accord that brings  
us to the lucid power of the spring  
to work at re-inventing work and love.  
We may be learning how to tell the truth.

7

We may be learning how to tell the truth.  
Distracted by a cinematic sky,  
Paris below two dozen shades of grey,  
in borrowed rooms we couldn't afford, we both  
work over words till we can tell ourselves  
what we saw. I get up at eight, go down  
to buy fresh croissants, put a saucepan on  
and brew first shared coffee. The water solves  
itself, salves us. Sideways, hugging the bank,  
two stocky women helped each other, drank  
from leathery cupped palms. We make our own  
descent downstream, getting our shoes wet, care-  
fully hoist cold handfuls from a crevice where  
azure striation swirls beyond the stones.



## HOME, AND I'VE

Covered the flowered linen  
where I graze  
on a convolvulus that hides in  
lion grass, and ride in-

to the sunrise on a sand  
horse. These days  
shorten, but the afternoon simmered  
me down. I had dinner

alone, with retrospective  
on the blaz-  
on of your throat's tiger-lily flush  
and your salt sap enough

company until tomorrow.  
The fat blue  
lamp spills on a ziggurat of books,  
mug the same cobalt. Looks

like reprise of lesson one  
in how to  
keep on keeping on. Easier, with  
you fixed hours away; both

solitude and company  
have a new  
savor: yours. Sweet woman, I'll woman-  
fully word a nomen-

clature for what we're doing  
when we come  
to; come to each other with our eyes,  
ears, arms, minds, everything wide

open. Your tonic augments  
my humdrum  
incantations till they work. I can  
stop envying the one

whose berth's the lap where I'd like  
to roll home  
tonight. I've got May's new book for bed,  
steak, greens, and wine inside

me, you back tomorrow, some  
words, some laz-  
y time (prune the plants, hear Mozart) to  
indulge in missing you.

## PANTOUM

There is a serviceable wooden dory  
rocking gently at the lip of ocean,  
from where her moorline loops back loosely  
to an outrider of the wet forest.

Rocking gently at the lip of ocean,  
whorled and rosy carapaces glimmer.  
To an outrider of the wet forest  
who kneels at the undulant flat belly

whorled and rosy carapaces glimmer  
under, the water is a mirror dreaming.  
Who kneels at the undulant flat belly  
feels her pulse gyre in the liquid circles.

Under the water is a mirror dreaming  
furled leaves. She kneads and presses her friend's  
spine,  
feels her pulse gyre in the liquid circles  
her palm oils on smooth skin, opening like

furled leaves. She kneads and presses her friend's  
spine,  
enters her own blood's tiderush, leaves  
her palm oils on smooth skin. Opening like  
shrubby parting to bare fingers, she

enters. Her own blood's tiderush leaves  
her charged with flammable air, igniting the  
shrubby. Parting to bare fingers, she  
grows, reaches into the fire licking



her, charged with flammable air, igniting the  
dry tinder, and the wet places that flame like brandy.  
Grows, reaches into the fire licking  
her clean, that nourishes as it consumes

dry tinder. And the wet places that flame like brandy  
are knowledgeable. They affirm  
her: clean. That nourishes as it consumes  
detritus of self-doubt, whispers she fears

are knowledgeable. They affirm  
each other in themselves. Still, when the  
detritus of self-doubt whispers, she fears  
the empty pool, that secret. They could lose

each other in themselves, still. When the  
postcards begin arriving, they depict  
the empty pool, that secret. They could lose  
jobs, balance, money, central words, music.

Postcards begin arriving. They depict  
themselves living in a perfect landscape, with  
jobs, balance, money: central. Words, music  
one made for the other, late at night, as they rocked

themselves. Living in a perfect landscape, with  
passionate friends, you'd ache, she thinks.  
One made for the other? Late at night, as they rocked  
into incognate languages, were they still

passionate friends? You'd ache, she thinks,  
if your mind buzzed with translations of denial  
into incognate languages. Were they still  
anywhere near the hidden rainforest?

If your mind buzzed with translations of denial,  
you might not see the gapping in the hedgerows,  
anywhere near the hidden rainforest,  
a child could push through, or a tall woman stooping.

You might not see the gapping in the hedgerows  
at first. She grew up here, points out where  
a child could push through, or a tall woman. Stooping,  
however many shoulder in, to the brambles

at first. She grew up here, points out where  
the path mounts, damp under eye-high ferns.  
However many shoulder into the brambles,  
each one inhales the solitude of climbing.

The path mounts, damp under eye-high ferns.  
Cedars aspire to vanishing point in the sky.  
Each one inhales the solitude of climbing  
lichenous rocks. In soft perpetual rain,

cedars aspire to vanishing point in the sky,  
then, sea-stained and enormous, niched for foothold,  
lichenous rocks, in soft perpetual rain.  
Each, agile or clumsy, silently scales them.

Then, see: Stained and enormous, niched for foothold  
by tidepools sloshing broken shells and driftwood  
(each, agile or clumsy, silently scales them  
to her own size), boulders embrace the Sound.

By tidepools sloshing broken shells, and driftwood  
from where her moorline loops back loosely  
to her own sides (boulders embrace the sound  
there) is a serviceable wooden dory.

## FEELING AND FORM

*for Sandy Moore and for Susanne K. Langer*

Dear San: Everybody doesn't write poetry.  
A lot of people doodle profiles, write  
something they think approximates poetry  
because nobody taught them to read poetry.  
Rhyming or trailing gerunds, clumps of words  
straggle a page, unjustified—poetry?  
It's not like talking, so it must be poetry.  
Before they learn to write, all children draw  
pictures grown-ups teach them how not to draw.  
Anyone learns/unlearns the craft of poetry  
too. The fourth grader who gets a neat like-  
ness of Mom in crayon's not unlike

the woman who sent you her Tone Poem, who'd like  
her admiration praised. That isn't poetry,  
unless she did the work that makes it like  
this, any, work, in outrage, love, or lik-  
ing an apple's October texture. Write  
about anything—I wish I could. It's like  
the still-lives you love: you don't have to like  
apples to like Cézanne. I do like words,  
which is why I make things out of words  
and listen to their hints, resounding like  
skipping-stones radiating circles, draw-  
ing context from text, the way I've watched you draw

a pepper shaker on a table, draw  
it again, once more, until it isn't like  
anything but your idea of a draw-  
ing, like an idea of movement, draw-  
ing its shape from sequence. You write poetry.  
I was a clever child who liked to draw,  
and did it well, but when I watch you draw,  
you rubber-face like I do when I write:



chewed lip, cat-tongue, smiles, scowls that go with  
right  
choices, perplexed, deliberate, withdrawn  
in worked play, conscious of the spaces words  
or lines make as you make them, without words

for instant exegesis. Molding words  
around a shape's analogous to draw-  
ing these coffee-cups in settings words  
describe, but whose significance leaves words  
unsaid, because it's drawn, because it's like  
not my blue mug, but inked lines. Chosen words  
—I couldn't write *your white mug*—collect words  
they're meant, or drawn to, make mental space poetry  
extends beyond the page. If you thought poetry  
were merely nicely ordered private words  
for two eyes only, why would you say, "Write  
me a letter, dammit!" This is a letter, right?

Wrong. Form intimates fiction. I could write  
*me* as a mathematician, weave in words  
implying *you* a man, sixteen, a right-  
handed abstract expressionist. I'd write  
untruths, from which some other *you* could draw  
odd inferences. Though I don't, I write  
*you*, and you're the Donor on the right-  
hand panel, kneeling in sable kirtle. Like-  
ly I'm the lady left of you, who'd like  
to peer into your missal, where the writ-  
ing (legible Gothic) lauds in Latin poetry  
the Lady at the center. Call her poetry,

virtual space, or Bona Dea. Poetry  
dovetails contradictions. If I write  
a private *you* a public discourse, words  
tempered and stroked will draw you where you draw  
these lines, and yours, convergent, made, unlike;

that likelihood draws words I write to poetry.

## TAKING NOTICE

"two women together is a work  
nothing in civilization has made simple"

Adrienne Rich: *XXI Love Poems*

1

My child wants dolls, a tutu, that girls' world made  
pretty and facile. Sometimes. Sometimes I  
want you around uncomplicatedly.  
Work every day; love (the same one) every  
night: old songs and new choir the parade  
of coupled women whose fidelity  
is a dyke icon. You are right: if we  
came to new love and friendship with a sad  
baggage of endings, we would come in bad  
faith, and bring, rooted already, seed  
of a splitting. Serial monogamy  
is a cogwheeled hurt, though you don't like the word.  
The neighbor's tireless radio sings lies  
through the thin wall behind my desk and bed.

2

Morning: the phone jangles me from words: you,  
working at his place, where you slept last night,  
missed me. You'll bring drawings. I missed you too.  
What centers, palpably swelling my tight  
chest: lust, tenderness, an itch of tears.  
Three Swedish Ivy rootlings get a pot.  
Wash earth-crumbed hands, strip, put long underwear  
on, tug, zip, buckle, tie, button, go out—  
a mailbox full of bills and circulars.  
I trust you: it's a knife-edge of surprise  
through words I couldn't write down, subvocalize  
across Eighty-First Street, cold as it was  
at eight when I put Iva on the bus,  
stalling through iced slush between frost-rimed cars.

3

When that jackbooted choreography  
sends hobnailed cabrioles across a brain,  
the stroked iron pulling lovers together pulls  
them apart. Through the ecstatic reverie  
of hands, eyes, mouths, our surfaces' silken  
sparking, heraldic plants and animals  
alive on our tender cartography,  
the homesick victim glimpses the coast of pain,  
hears the familiar argot of denial.  
Woman I love, as old, as new to me  
as any moment of delight risked in  
my lumpy heretofore unbeautiful  
skin, if I lost myself in you I'd be  
no better lost than any other woman.



4

She twists scraps of her hair in unshelled snails  
crossed by two hairpins. It takes forty-five  
minutes. I'm twelve. I've come in to pee. I've  
left *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales*  
in the hamper. "Don't believe what you read.  
Women who let men use them are worse than  
whores. Men despise them. I can understand  
prostitutes, never 'free love'." Not freed  
to tell her what I thought of *More Than Human*,  
I wipe between my mottled oversized  
girl-haunches. I'll be one of the despised,  
I know, as she forbids with her woman's  
body, flaccid, gaunt in a greyed nightgown,  
something more culpable for us than "men."

5

"I never will be only a Lesbian."  
Bare rubber, wedged beside its tube of cream  
in the bookshelf near your bed, your diaphragm  
lies on Jane Cooper's poem and Gertrude Stein.  
I've torn our warm cocoon again. I listen.  
Our sweated breasts nuzzle under the quilt.  
(Yes, there's one in my bathroom cabinet;  
unused, now.) If a man sleeps with men, and women,  
he's *queer*: *vide* Wilde, Goodman, Gide, Verlaine.  
A woman who does can be "passionately  
heterosexual" (said Norman Pearson of H.D.).  
Anyone's love with women doesn't count.  
Rhetoric, this. You talk about your friend.  
I hold you, wanting whatever I want.

6

Angry, I speak, and pass the hurt to you,  
your pencil-smudged face naked like a child's.  
Each time we don't know what we're getting into  
or out of. Later, washed out and reconciled,  
we wait on the subway platform, Mutt and Jeff  
puffed out with football socks and Duofolds,  
word-shy, habitually bold enough  
to sit thigh against corduroy thigh and hold  
hands; though, ungendered in thick winter gear,  
only your cheek's epicene ivory  
makes us the same sex. No one looks healthy  
in the perpetual fluorescence. Here  
(you say) the light is the same night and day,  
but it feels like night at night anyway.

7

If we talk, we're too tired to make love; if we  
make love, these days, there's hardly time to talk.  
We sit to share supper once, twice a week.  
You're red and white with cold; we're brusque, scared,  
shy.  
Difficult speech curdles the café au lait  
next morning. In the short twelve hours between  
we rubbed, laughed, tongued, exhorted, listened,  
came,  
slept like packed spoons. Wrapped up against the day  
we trudge through slush as far as the downtown  
subway, brush cold-tattered lips. You're gone  
to hunch sock-shod over your camera, while  
I stare a spiral notebook down six miles  
north, indulging some rich weave of weeks where  
we'd work, play, not cross-reference calendars.

8

The sitter, sniffing, leaves, clicks the door shut.  
Shuck boots; back from Womanbooks. Iva fights  
the quilt in her top bunk, in striped underwear.  
A painter read from six months journals, through  
learning she loved a woman, at forty-two.  
If you were here, we'd compare pasts, compare  
process to language, art; you're not, tonight.  
Back at the revolution all is not  
well. We, women, patient mockers of our own  
enterprise, are mined with self-destruction.  
We build what we need. We wreck what we build.  
I'm making coffee when the telephone  
rings: you, ducked into a booth across town?  
Another woman, friend, as risked, as real.

9

In my boots and blazer I feel like Julien Sorel.  
Should I bow from the waist, flourish my hand  
three rolls from crown to knee? No, I'm polite and  
verbose. Films; drinks; the meeting goes as well  
as it could, until five o'clock when he  
leaves, and I wax vehement over beer  
bottles. Look, baby, I *want* to be queer,  
it's the light at the other end of the  
long march, et cetera. Cut: a streamlined  
she-torso with no feet, no hands, no head;  
intercut penis/hammer; eye reads: blows:  
his filmed image of—you? Woman? Who knows  
(I don't) what's between you two. We spar down  
slicked streets to your stop; kiss. I walk downtown.



10

The grizzled doorman lets the doctors' wives  
into and out of the rainstorm. Thirty-year-  
old mothers hive here till their men's careers  
regroup the swarm for boxed suburban lives.  
The doorman's sixty, football-shouldered, white.  
The multi-racial anoraked interns  
will earn, per year, at forty, more than he earns  
in ten. Maybe one-tenth of the scrubbed bright  
wives will earn his wages; fewer do.  
Knees dovetailed at The Duchess, I'm giving you  
my hours with a talk-starved woman I knew there  
through her tough small girl, while on the polished  
square  
at our boot-toes blue-jeaned women slow-dance  
to a rhythmic alto plaint of ruined romance.

11

In the Public Theater lobby, I wait for Marie.  
Black overcoat, brown plait: two people waltz  
close, through the crowd's buzz. I watch, finding fault  
with the dance's hierarchic He and She.  
They weave past: Tall leads, Short follows. I see  
they're women. I love them. I stand near  
them, grin, wish I wore a lavender star.  
Marie's here, blinking, owlish. We hug. We  
go upstairs. The two women sit one row  
ahead, kissing. I look at them, look away.  
They are more edifying than the play  
(will they laugh at woman-made misogyny?  
Yes . . .) but I shouldn't stare, and when I do  
I flush above the belt and throb below.

12

You're high on work, bouncing words off the ceiling  
as we lie down, go down into a flurry of down,  
arms and legs enlaced. My tongue around  
your hillocks shudders your pleasure, feeling  
its own rough touch call the blood-rush swelling  
everything mutable to immanence.

We giggle at our fork-tongued eloquence,  
gasp at our fingers' dazzling slide. You're telling  
me about Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein  
images juxtaposed on a white wall  
moving, the metaphysics of a meal  
we shared, till we kiss ourselves to a wine-  
drenched feast whose mute wit is a mutual  
silence honed in our rapt mouths to a sign.

13

No better lost than any other woman  
turned resolutely from the common pool  
of our erased, emended history,  
I think of water, in this book-strewn room. In  
another room, my daughter, home from school,  
audibly murmurs "spanking, stupid, angry  
voice"—a closet drama where I am  
played second-hand to unresisting doll  
daughters. Mother and daughter both, I see  
myself, the furious and unforgiven;  
myself, the terrified and terrible;  
the child punished into autonomy;  
the unhealed woman hearing her own voice damn  
her to the nightmares of the brooding girl.

14

And I shout at Iva, whine at you. Easily  
we choose up for nuclear family,  
with me the indirect, snivelling, put-upon  
mother/wife, child's villain, feminist heroine,  
bore. On thick white plates the failed communion  
congeals. Iva bawls in her room. You're on  
edge, worked out, fed up, could leave. Shakily  
we stop. You wash dishes, drop one; it breaks. We  
should laugh. We don't. A potted plant crashed too.  
Frowning, I salvage the crushed shoots, while you  
deflect my scowl with yours. You leave a phone  
message for your friend, while I read one  
last picture book, permit a bedtime drink  
to a nude child, who's forgiven me—I think.

15

Through wet August nights we were the rev-  
olution crawling forward on each other's  
bellies. Our anecdotes about our mothers  
told what would be foible, what unforgiv-  
able. Twenty-seven, thirty-six, five,  
we three amble, howl at the March full moon  
over housing projects. Iva hangs on  
our elbows. "Drag me!" Our tensed arms heft live  
weight, grubby and kicking. Your tired pale  
face shifts in the moon-pool: a farm woman,  
a raw boy, a red-lipped hedonist.  
Night slims down, warms up towards our third  
season.

I lean above my unkempt child toward all  
of them. She tugs us, "I *hate* to be kissed!"

16

Dreams play diverse cadenzas of betrayal.  
I wake word-foundered. Anything I say  
discovers discord. Chin to squared-off chin,  
crossed arms, I worry you, "How do you feel?"  
"Anxious. I feel cut off and far away."  
You and I have done, will do this again:  
one querulous; response: one inflexible.  
I A-train uptown through the ordinary  
assaults. MEN STONE FEM LIBBERS IN IRAN.  
Childless, anonymous, accountable,  
I gauge how wide apart to stake my knees.  
Most of the faces facing me are brown.  
None of the choices facing me are simple.  
I can't, today, begin a sentence "We . . ."

17

I hold you, wanting whatever I want:  
to taste cold water; to get up and pee;  
to fuck; to know there might be space named "we"  
to build on. I tend to the first two, can't  
have all. You're asleep. Still in underpants,  
I wash the percolator out, start coffee,  
write, cross out, write more. Anxiety  
shifts through the placed words' patterns, takes  
distance  
enough that when you say my name, I lie  
with you, loosened, in your waking fragrance:  
soaped hair, warm bread of your skin, exhaled mint.  
My eyes encounter your lacustrine eyes,  
where you might, I might, miscall lust, clarity,  
and I hook my tongue on something like a sentence.



18

I'll tell you what I don't want: an affair:  
love, by appointment only, twice a week;  
grimy, gratuitous life lived elsewhere  
with others. When it's easier to speak  
about than to you, when I think of you  
more than I'm with you, more anxious than tender,  
I feel less than a friend. There's work to do.  
Artist, woman, I love you; craft and gender,  
if we're antagonists, aren't in dispute.  
Love starts with circumstance; it grows with care  
to something self-sufficient, centered, root  
from which the cultivators branch, the air  
renewing them transpired rich from its pores.  
Or so I hoped while I was celibate.

19

When I read poems to the art students  
I wanted you there; when my ephebes, shar-  
ing craft I taught, showed off, I wanted you there;  
when I talk a woman around imprudence,  
when I orchestrate a meeting or a meal,  
when my thoughts unroll imaginal sentences,  
when I come through better than I thought I was,  
I want you there. But I surface seasick, feel  
desire and apprehension lashed like stones  
to me. Reeled toward you in the elevator,  
I shrink inches from my accomplished stature  
of thoughtful hero, whom you haven't seen,  
diminishing to needy lover, green  
with doubt and necessarily alone.

20

You separate perception from perceiver;  
I make it sound like virtue that I can't.  
In this imaginary argument  
we've had repeatedly when we're together,  
my mind is limbic, weighted like the weather.  
You're sunlit on another continent.  
It's rained five days here. The first two I spent  
indoors, ate cheese, read magazines, neither  
nourished nor informed. My anger paired  
with your absence: lonely parameters.  
I want to be the child-philosopher  
cross-legged in the drop-leaf table's shelter;  
bare legs crossed on the nubbly pile, who felt her  
mind's flux find form in fixed faces of chairs.

21

Down from the hills at dawn, a thunderstorm  
pounded the cabin roof. Indoors, I rolled  
to the wall, a log quilted against spring cold,  
and wove the noise into a ravelling dream  
whose threads snapped into syllables Marie  
was muttering from the upper bunk in clear  
incoherence. You're not here. Iva's not here.  
We sat on the porch late, in luxury  
of rambling childless conversation, ate  
a steak cooked on the camp stove, with Bordeaux  
from New Paltz, talked more, turned in. Candlelit  
again, impatient and disconsolate,  
I wait afternoon rains out, rummage through  
scrap thoughts while Marie writes, stalled, missing  
you.

22

The late-May weather's risky as a mood.  
Yesterday's freighted clouds have burned away  
leaving scoured sky, mud, sunlight, solitude  
I frame in tin cups of thermos coffee  
back on the porch with Marie. Heliotrope,  
I lodge, knees up in weeds, on a gravelled slope  
where tall white pines light candles for the summer.  
On my knapsack strap, a V-winged bomber  
modelled from a scarab perches on moon-  
jitney legs, a horsefly numbed with noon  
sun. I've learned to pick out a late wood-  
thrush song enlacing the percussive jays.  
This respite from inclement weather could  
(clouds are banking up, though) last through the day.

23

As yoked to her by absence as by presence,  
I image, fifteen minutes since she's gone,  
her sneakers pushing leaves up as she ran  
into the woods, urged on to independence  
by me. Feet on the porch rail, I drink silence,  
thinking: She has to cross the road alone.  
If she doesn't find anyone at home  
—the six-year-old gone shopping with his parents—  
will she get panicky and lose her way?  
Revenant, you nap. Marie drove to town.  
I look up from my book, identify  
the she-cardinal's sanguine rose-brown,  
then check my watch. From down the path comes  
"Hey,  
Mom!" Forty-five minutes on my own.

24

Strata of August 12: portable typewriter,  
seashell ashtray, blue-and-white plastic lighter,  
a jagged ochre flint from the Val d'Oise,  
two amber quartz flakes, two packs of Gauloises,  
tan spiral notebook, brown spiral address  
book, a friend's typed essay on loneliness,  
her card from Russian River, a map of France,  
a blank postcard of market day in Vence,  
four letters in four colored envelopes,  
typing pad, cold coffee in a glass cup,  
airmail envelopes in a paper band,  
two felt pens, one capped, one in a beige hand,  
writing, straw mat, glossy black paint that pulls  
the eye on reflected light to the facing hills.

25

We work, play, don't cross-reference calendars  
here. Sun gilds a scrub-oak hill; the fig tree  
drops purple dry first fruit on the cement  
terrace that's, for the rest of August, ours,  
where you project perspectives, blond head bent  
to big papers. I chart stratigraphy  
of my desk, glimpse, in a pitcher, flowers  
you brought, for our year, though we're both diffident  
to celebrate. I start letters, can't write  
what it's like, face to face, learning to live  
through four A.M. eruptions, when we fight  
like bruised children we were. Can I believe  
persistent love demands change, not forgive-  
ness, accept the hard gift of your different sight?





*from* **ASSUMPTIONS**



## GRAFFITI FROM THE GARE SAINT-MANQUÉ

*for Zed Bee*

Outside the vineyard is a caravan  
of Germans taking pictures in the rain.  
The local cheese is Brillat-Savarin.  
The best white wine is Savigny-les-Beaune.  
We learn Burgundies while we have the chance  
and lie down under cabbage-rose wallpaper.  
It's too much wine and brandy, but I'll taper  
off later. Who is watering my plants?  
I may go home as wide as Gertrude Stein  
—another Jewish Lesbian in France.

Around the sculptured Dukes of Burgundy,  
androgynous monastics, faces cowed,  
thrust bellies out in marble ecstasy  
like child swimmers having their pigtails towed.  
Kids sang last night. A frieze of celebrants  
circles the tomb, though students are in school,  
while May rain drizzles on the beautiful  
headlines confirming François Mitterand's  
election. We have Reagan. Why not be  
another Jewish Lesbian in France?

Aspiring Heads of State are literate  
here, have favorite poets, can explain  
the way structuralists obliterate  
a text. They read at night. They're still all men.  
Now poppy-studded meadows of Provence  
blazon beyond our red sardine-can car.  
We hope chairpersons never ask: why are  
unblushing deviants abroad on grants?  
My project budget listed: Entertain  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.



I meant my pithy British village neighbor  
who misses old days when sorority  
members could always know each other: they wore  
short-back-and-sides and a collar and tie.  
She did, too. Slavic eyes, all romance  
beneath an Eton crop with brilliantined  
finger-waves, photographed at seventeen  
in a dark blazer and a four-in-hand:  
a glimpse of salad days that made the day for  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

Then we went on to peanuts and Campari,  
she and her friend, my friend and I, and then  
somehow it was nine-thirty and a hurry  
to car and *carte* and a carafe of wine,  
Lapin Sauté or Truite Meunière in Vence.  
Convivial quartet of friends and lovers:  
had anyone here dreaded any other's  
tears, dawn recriminations and demands?  
Emphatically not. That must have been  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

It's hard to be almost invisible.  
You think you must be almost perfect too.  
When your community's not sizeable,  
it's often a community of two,  
and a dissent between communicants  
is a commuter pass to the abyss.  
Authorities who claim you don't exist  
would sometimes find you easy to convince.  
(It helps if you can talk about it to  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.)

A decorated she-Academician  
opines we were thought up by horny males.  
No woman of equivalent position  
has yet taken the wind out of her sails.  
(How would her "lifelong companion" have thanked  
her?)

Man loving Man's *her* subject, without mention  
if what they do is due to her invention  
—and if I'd been her mother, I'd have spanked her.  
(Perhaps in a suppressed draft *Hadrian's*  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.)

Then the advocates of Feminitude  
—with dashes as their only punctuation—  
explain that Reason is to be eschewed:  
In the Female Subconscious lies salvation.  
Suspiciously like Girlish Ignorance,  
it seems a rather watery solution.  
If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.  
If I can't think about it, I won't dance.  
So let the ranks of *Psych et Po* include  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

I wish I had been packed off to the nuns  
to learn good manners, Attic Greek, and Latin.  
(No public Bronx Junior High School fit all that in.)  
My angsts could have been casuistic ones.  
It's not my feminist inheritance  
to eat roots, drink leaf broth, live in a cave,  
and not even know how to misbehave  
with just one vowel and five consonants.  
This patchwork autodidact Anglophone's  
another Jewish Lesbian in France,

following Natalie Barney, Alice B.  
Toklas, Djuna Barnes, generous Bryher,  
Romaine Brooks, Sylvia Beach, H.D.,  
Tamara de Lempicka, Janet Flanner.  
They made the best use of the circumstance  
that blood and stockings often both were bluish;  
(they all were white, and only Alice Jewish)  
wicked sept / oct / nonagenarians.  
Would it have saved Simone Weil's life to be  
another Jewish Lesbian in France?

It isn't sex I mean. Sex doesn't save  
anyone, except, sometimes, from boredom  
(and the underpaid under-class of whoredom  
is often bored at work). I have a grave  
suspicion ridicule of Continence  
or Chastity is one way to disparage  
a woman's choice of any job but marriage.  
Most of us understand what we renounce.  
(This was a lunchtime peptalk I once gave  
another Jewish Lesbian in France

depressed by temporary solitude  
but thinking coupled bliss was dubious.)  
I mean: one way to love a body viewed  
as soiled and soiling existential dross  
is knowing through your own experience  
a like body embodying a soul  
to be admirable and loveable.  
That is a source that merits nourishment.  
Last night despair dressed as self-loathing wooed  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

The sheet was too soft. Unwashed for three weeks,  
it smelled like both of us. The sin we are  
beset by is despair. I rubbed my cheeks  
against the cotton, thought, I wouldn't care  
if it were just *my* funk. Despair expands  
to fill . . . I willed my arm: extend; hand: stroke  
that sullen shoulder. In the time it took  
synapse to realize abstract commands,  
the shoulder's owner fell asleep. Still there  
another Jewish Lesbian in France

stared at the sickle moon above the skylight,  
brooding, equally sullen, that alone  
is better after all. As close as my right  
foot, even my bed stops being my own.  
Could I go downstairs quietly, make plans  
for myself, not wake her? Who didn't undress,

slept on the couch bundled with loneliness  
rather than brave that nuptial expanse  
five weeks before. Another contradiction  
another Jewish Lesbian in France

may reconcile more gracefully than I.  
We're ill-equipped to be obliging wives.  
The post office and travel agency  
are significant others in our lives.  
Last summer I left flowers at Saint Anne's  
shrine. She had daughters. One who, legends tell,  
adrift, woman-companioned, shored (is still  
revered) in the Camargue, her holy band's  
navigatrix, Mary, calming the sea  
—another Jewish Lesbian in France?

It says they lived together forty years,  
Mary and Mary and Sarah (who was black).  
Unsaintly ordinary female queers,  
we packed up and went separately back.  
We'd shared the road with gypsy sleeper vans  
to join Sarah's procession to the shore.  
Our own month-end anabasis was more  
ambiguous. Among Americans  
my polyglot persona disappears,  
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

*Coeur mis à nu* in sunlight, khaki pants  
I've rolled up in a beach towel so ants  
and crickets from the leafage won't invade  
their sweaty legs: in a loaned hermit-glade  
pine-redolent of New Hampshire, not France,  
I disentangle from the snares I laid.  
Liver-lobed mushrooms thicken in the shade,  
shrubs unwrap, pinelings thrust through mulch. Noon  
    slants  
across my book, my chest, its lemonade  
rays sticky as a seven-year-old's hands.



## FIFTEEN TO EIGHTEEN

I'd almost know, the nights I snuck in late,  
at two, at three, as soon as I had tucked  
into myself tucked in, to masturbate  
and make happen what hadn't when I fucked,  
there'd be the gargled cry, always "God damn  
you to hell," to start with, from the other  
bedroom: she was in shock again. I swam  
to my surface to take care of my mother.  
That meant, run for a glass of orange juice,  
clamp her shoulders with one arm, try to pour  
it down her throat while she screamed, "No, God

damn  
you!" She is stronger than I am  
when this happens. If she rolls off on the floor,  
I can't / she won't let me / lift her up. Fructose  
solution, a shot and she'd come around.  
At half-past-two, what doctor could I call?  
Sometimes I had to call the hospital.  
More often, enough orange juice got down,  
splashed on us both.

"What are you doing here?  
Where were you? Why is my bed in this mess?  
How did you get those scratches on your face?  
What were you doing, out until this hour?"

## MOTHER II

No one is "Woman" to another  
woman, except her mother.  
Her breasts were unmysterious  
naked: limp, small. But I thought pus  
must ooze from them: her underwear  
like bandages. Blood came from where  
I came from, stanchd with pads between  
her legs, under the girdle, seen  
through gaping bathroom doors. Around  
her waist, all sorts of rubber. Bound  
to stop the milk, my milk, her breasts  
stayed flat. I watched my round self, guessed  
a future where I'd droop and leak.  
But dry and cool against her cheek  
I'd lean my cheek. I stroked the lace  
and serge she sheathed her carapace  
with: straight skirts, close cuffs, full sleeves;  
was, wordless, catechized; believed:  
nude, she was gaunt; dressed, she was slim;  
nude, she was flabby; dressed, her firm  
body matched her brisk, precise  
mid-continental teacher's voice,  
which she had molded, dry, perfect-  
ed from a swamp of dialect.  
Naked or clad, for me, she wore  
her gender, perpetual *chador*,

her individual complex  
history curtained off by sex.  
Child, I determined that I would  
not be subsumed in womanhood.  
Whatever she was, I was not.  
Whoever she was, I forgot  
to ask, and she forgot to tell,  
muffled in costumes she as well  
rejected as a girl, resumed  
—on my account? Are women doomed,  
beasts that repeat ourselves, to rage  
in youth against our own old age,  
in age to circumscribe our youth  
with self-despise dressed as truth?  
Am I "Woman" to my water-  
dwelling brown loquacious daughter,  
corporeal exemplar of  
her thirst for what she would not love?



## AUTUMN 1980

*for Judith McDaniel*

I spent the night after my mother died  
in a farmhouse north of Saratoga Springs  
belonging to a thirty-nine-year-old  
professor with long, silvered wiry hair,  
a lively girl's flushed cheeks and gemstone eyes.  
I didn't know that she had died.

Two big bitches and a varying  
heap of cats snoozed near a black wood stove  
on a rag rug, while, on the spring-shot couch  
we talked late over slow glasses of wine.  
In the spare room near Saratoga Springs  
was a high box bed. My mother died  
that morning, of heart failure, finally.  
Insulin shocks burned out her memory.  
On the bed, a blue early-century  
Texas Star, in a room white and blue  
as my flannel pajamas. I'd have worn  
the same, but smaller, ten years old at home.  
Home was the Bronx, on Eastburn Avenue,  
miles south of the hermetic not-quite-new  
block where they'd sent this morning's ambulance.  
Her nurse had telephoned. My coat was on,  
my book-stuffed bag already on my back.  
She said, "Your mother had another shock.  
We'll be taking her to the hospital."  
I asked if I should stay. She said, "It's all  
right." I named the upstate college where



I'd speak that night. This had happened before.  
I knew / I didn't know: it's not the same.  
November cold was in that corner room  
upstairs, with a frame window over land  
the woman and another woman owned  
—who was away. I thought of her alone  
in her wide old bed, me in mine. I turned  
the covers back. I didn't know she had died.  
The tan dog chased cats; she had to be tied  
in the front yard while I went along  
on morning errands until, back in town,  
I'd catch my bus. November hills were raw  
fall after celebratory fall  
foliage, reunions, festival.  
I blew warmth on my hands in a dark barn  
where two shaggy mares whuffed in straw,  
dipped steaming velvet muzzles to the pail  
of feed. We'd left the pickup's heater on.  
It smelled like kapok when we climbed inside.  
We both unzipped our parkas for the ride  
back to the Saratoga bus station.  
I blamed the wind if I felt something wrong.  
A shrunken-souled old woman whom I saw  
once a month lay on a hospital  
slab in the Bronx. Mean or not, that soul  
in its cortège of history was gone.  
I didn't know that I could never know,